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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a district-wide survey of 7th grade students in a semi-rural school district where 23% of the students are Latino. Participating students completed the California School Climate and Safety Survey which assesses student perceptions regarding general school climate and personal safety-related experiences. Information on academic achievement was obtained through students' school records. Students' perceptions of school climate significantly predicted GPA across gender and ethnicity, with perception of school support functioning as the key school climate factor. Furthermore, analyses indicated that boys may be uniquely at-risk when considering perceptions of school climate and academic success. Compared with girls, boys' perceptions of school climate were more negative and they were more likely to report a wide range of victimization experiences. Ramifications for prevention and intervention are discussed. (Contains 15 references.) (Author)

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The Impact of School Climate: Variation by Ethnicity and Gender

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a district-wide survey of 7th grade students (N=369) in a semi-rural school district where 23% of the students are Latino. Participating students completed the California School Climate and Safety Survey (CSCSS; Furlong & Morrison, 1995), which assesses student perceptions regarding general school climate and personal safety-related experiences. Information on academic achievement was obtained through students' school records.

Students' perceptions of school climate significantly predicted GPA across gender and ethnicity, with perception of school support functioning as the key school climate factor. Furthermore, analyses indicated that boys may be uniquely at-risk when considering perceptions of school climate and academic success. Compared with girls, boys' perceptions of school climate were more negative and they were more likely to report a wide range of victimization experiences. Ramifications for prevention and intervention are discussed.

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Introduction

In the United States, students face approximately 3 million on-campus or near-campus crimes each year (Soriano, Soriano, & Jimenez, 1994), and such experiences may negatively impact their developmental and educational experiences (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992). In particular, a sense of personal safety is essential to a young person's ability to learn and achieve in a school setting (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994). Adolescence, in particular, is a period when youth are finding out where they fit into the world, and students spend a significant portion of their time in the school environment. As such, it is imperative that school psychologists incorporate the mandate of fostering safe and nurturing learning environments into their professional role (Morrison, et al.).

School climate has been variously defined and examined, ranging from overall organizational climate (Schmitt, Sacco, Ramey, Ramey, & Chan, 1999), to classroom climate, to attributes of teachers or students (Kuperminc, Leaderbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). While these more objective aspects of school climate are linked to student outcomes such as academic achievement (Griffith, 1995; Schmitt et al.) and school engagement (Conchas, 2001), more subjective measures of the school environment, such as student perceptions, may offer even more potent associations with student outcomes (Kuperminc et al., 1997). The California School Climate and Safety Survey (CSCSS; Furlong & Morrison, 1994) is one measure of school climate that assesses students' perceptions of three key elements of the school environment, (1) how well the school is maintained, (2), how supportive teacher and other adults at school are, (3) how safe students feel.

Part of the school psychologist's role is to assist students in developing skills that allow them to effectively negotiate the demands of the school environment (Furlong, Morrison, & Clontz, 1993). In order to achieve this task, school psychologists need to understand the particular risk factors facing students, as well as the existing skills and resilience students bring to the learning environment. Given the link between students' perceptions of school climate and academic outcomes, students' subjective perception of their school environment may indeed function as a risk or protective factor that requires school psychologists' attention.

Antisocial behavior and academic failure represent context specific behaviors and, thus, prevention efforts must attend to identifying contexts associated with these behaviors in order to be effective (McElvoy & Welker, 2000). Furthermore, within a given context, different students may vary in their perceptions of safety, resulting in differential impact on academic achievement. The relative contribution of school climate factors that influence perceptions of school environment may differ across ethnic groups and gender. For example, Latino students appear to emphasize teacher fairness, caring, and praise of effort as the most salient dimensions of school climate (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996). Such findings indicate the need for a better understanding of the effects of student perceptions of school climate on academic achievement, and ways that these perceptions may vary according to factors such as gender and ethnicity (Kuperminc et al., 1997).

This poster session presents findings from a district-wide study of middle school students' perceptions of school climate and safety. The purpose of the present study is two-fold: (1) to explore the relationships among perceptions of school climate, victimization, and academic achievement in middle school students; and (2) to examine possible differences in perceptions of school climate across gender and ethnicity.

Method

Participants

The study involves the majority of 7th grade students in a semi-rural school district (N=369), with a relatively even split of males (N=186) and females (N=183). Complete data were

not available for all students on all variables, therefore the actual number of participants varies depending on the particular analyses. The district has a moderate Latino population. For this study, students were designated as Latino if any of the following criteria were met: (1) home language Spanish, (2) primary language Spanish, (3) English Language Learner status. As a result, approximately 23% of the current sample (N=80) was categorized as Latino.

Materials

Participating students completed the California School Climate and Safety Survey (CSCSS; Furlong & Morrison, 1995). The 102-item self-report CSCSS provides information on school violence victimization, as well as three key factors related to school climate: Well-Kept School, Supportive School, and Unsafe School. The attitude portion of the CSCSS has been found to have an internal reliability of .88 (Furlong, Morrison, & Boles, 1991). The survey also contains several validity check items. The survey is available in English and Spanish. For climate factors, each item has four response options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The School Victimization section presents 21 different types of violent or aggressive events involving bullying, harassment, property intrusion, serious physical intrusion, or threats related to deviant behavior. Students respond "Yes" or "No" depending on their experience with each type of event. In one study, internal reliability for this index was .86 (Rosenblatt & Furlong, 1997).

Questionnaires were administered in group format during the school day to all students with parental permission. Both English and Spanish versions were available and students were asked to self-select language preference for survey completion.

Information on academic achievement (i.e., student GPA) was obtained through students' school records.

Results

School Climate

Preliminary analyses examined gender and ethnic differences on GPA and perceptions of school climate. Multivariate analyses of variance were computed comparing perceptions of school climate by gender and ethnicity. Latino students did not differ significantly from non-Latino students on any of the three factors (Well-Kept School, Unsafe School, Supportive School), although a trend existed wherein Latino students viewed the school as more supportive than non-Latino students ($F = 2.99$, $p = .085$). In addition, Latino students possessed lower GPA's than non-Latino students ($t = 4.730$, $p = .000$).

Gender differences were significant for each of the three school climate factors, Well-Kept school ($F = 5.07$, $p = .025$), Supportive School ($F = -6.83$, $p = .009$), and Unsafe School ($F = 8.60$, $p = .004$). Boys were less likely than girls to positively endorse statements indicating that the campus was well maintained. They were also less likely to agree that the adults in the school environment were supportive. They were more likely to agree with statements indicating that the school was unsafe. A t-test also indicated significant gender differences for GPA ($t = -4.575$, $p = .000$), with boys having lower GPA's than girls.

Correlations explored the relationship between GPA and the school climate factors. Boys' perception of the school as supportive were positively related to grade point average ($r = .38$, $p = .000$), as was their perception of the school as well-kept ($r = .175$, $p = .05$). For girls, only perceptions of the school as supportive correlated significantly with GPA ($r = .211$, $p = .016$). As with boys, Latino student's perceptions of their school as supportive ($r = .388$, $p = .002$) and well-kept ($r = .308$, $p = .018$) significantly correlated with GPA. For non-Latino students, only the supportive school factor correlated significantly with GPA ($r = .33$, $p = .000$). Thus, for all groups,

a positive relationship existed between GPA and self-assessment of the school environment as supportive.

Regression analyses were conducted separately by gender and ethnicity in order to explore the relative contribution of the three factors of school climate to school success, as measured by GPA. For students overall, perception of school climate was a significant predictor of GPA ($F=11.763$, $p = .000$). Perceptions of school climate contributed 12% of explained variance in academic achievement, with perceptions of the school as supportive alone acting as a statistically significant predictor.

For boys, perception of school climate was a significant predictor of GPA, accounting for 16% of the variance in academic achievement. As with the overall student population, only the factor of Supportive School functioned as a statistically significant predictor. In contrast, for girls, perceptions of school climate functioned as a significant predictor, but only accounted for 8% of explained variance in GPA. Two factors offered a substantial contribution, Supportive School and Well-Kept School.

Regression analyses were also conducted for Latino and non-Latino students. School climate views functioned as a significant predictor of GPA for both groups and contributed 17% of explained variance in GPA for Latino students and 12% for non-Latino students, with Supportive School again acting as the sole significant predictor.

Victimization

The overall incidence of severe violence was low, with teasing, bullying and theft being most common. Between 19-30% of students reported being victims of physical violence such as hitting, shoving, kicking.

Analyses of variance compared victimization by gender and ethnicity. Boys reported significantly higher levels of victimization than girls ($F=4.982$, $p = .027$). In particular, boys were significantly more likely to report being intentionally: (1) grabbed or shoved, (2) punched or kicked, (3) cut with a knife or something sharp, (4) hit with a rock or other object, (5) threatened with physical harm, (6) yelled or cursed at, and (7) threatened with a knife

Boys were also significantly more likely to report experiencing intentional personal property damage or theft (including theft using force), and seeing someone on campus with a knife or razor. They were also more likely to report dangerous gang activity and students getting hurt on the bus.

Latino students reported significantly less victimization than non-Latino students, $F=5.342$, $p = .022$. Latino students were more likely than non-Latino students to report experiencing both being grabbed/shoved and punched/kicked. Latino students were less likely than non-Latino students to report experiencing: (1) "You had personal property smashed or damaged on purpose," (2) "You personally saw another student on campus with a knife or razor," (3) "Another student threatened to hurt you," (4) "Someone made fun of you, put you down," (5) "Someone made unwanted physical sexual advances toward you," (6) "Someone sexually harassed you," and (7) "Someone tried to scare you by the way they looked at you."

Correlations explored the relationship between self-reported victimization and perceptions of school climate. For students overall, victimization scores correlated significantly with each of the three school climate factors. A positive correlation with the Unsafe School factor ($r = .34$, $p = .000$) indicates that students who experience more victimization also experienced their school as less safe. Negative correlations were found for Well-Kept School ($r = -.24$, $p = .000$) and Supportive School ($r = -.241$, $p = .000$) indicate that more highly victimized students perceive their schools to be less well-maintained and supportive. Similar significant correlations were found for both girls and boys. While significant correlations were found for non-Latino students on each of the three school climate factors, only the correlations between Victimization and Well-Kept School ($r = -.29$, $p = .038$) and Supportive School ($r = -.37$, $p = .007$) were significant for Latino students.

Discussion

Results provide valuable information regarding how school climate factors impact students' educational experience, and how these factors may differ according to gender or ethnic background.

The overall incidence of severe violence was low, with teasing, bullying and theft being most common. Between 19-30% of students reported being victims of physical violence such as hitting, shoving, kicking. For students overall, perception of school climate was a significant predictor of GPA, with perceptions of the school as supportive functioning as the key contributing element of school climate. The strong association between academic success and the support students felt from adults at school was significant across gender and ethnicity. For boys and Latino students, a more positive view of the maintenance of school facilities was associated with higher grades.

Latino students, whose overall GPA was lower than non-Latino students, reported less victimization than did non-Latino students. Latino students did not differ significantly from non-Latino students on any of the three school climate factors. School climate views functioned as a significant predictor of GPA for both groups and contributed 17% of explained variance in GPA for Latino students and 12% for non-Latino students, with supportive school acting as the sole significant predictor for both groups. The important role that support from school personnel played for Latino students in this study is consistent with prior findings that Latino students value teacher fairness, caring and praise as salient elements of school climate (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996), although these factors also seem important to non-Latino students.

Many school systems in the United States are structured to reward individualism and independent thinking, at the expense of more collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. Future efforts to improve school climate for Latino students may include drawing on the collectivistic style often valued in Latino cultures. For example, schools could utilize team teaching and group projects to model the importance of collaborative efforts.

Gender analyses indicated that boys may be uniquely at-risk when considering perceptions of school climate and academic success. Compared with girls, boys' perceptions of school climate were more negative. They were less likely to find the campus to be well-maintained or to find school staff supportive. Furthermore, they were more likely to report feeling unsafe at school. Boys were also more likely to report a wide range of victimization experiences than girls, and their GPA's tended to be lower.

Not only did boys hold less positive views of their school environment, but also for boys, perception of school climate predicted twice as much variance in GPA than it did for girls. This suggests that school climate is especially important to the academic achievement of male middle school students. The fact that boys experience the school climate to be less safe and supportive than girls is consistent with the finding that boys are more often the victims of violence and aggression. Compared with girls, boys reported significantly greater experience with a number of types of aggression, both physical and verbal. Together, these finding suggest that school climate may be less responsive to the needs of boys. As such, schools may want to consider tailoring interventions more specifically to meet the needs of the male students, as opposed to implementing a generic, school-wide approach. In particular, creating opportunities for male students to feel connected to school personnel is essential. For example, structured occasions for male students to interact with adults on campus, such as lunchtime sports or clubs, may enhance adult-youth connections. In addition, formal or informal mentoring programs between male students and school personnel may also help achieve this goal. As was evident across the various groups, feeling connected to and supported by adults in the school environment is a key element of school climate that impacts academic achievement. While all students may benefit from such programs, particular attention could be given to recruiting boys.

For students overall, Victimization scores correlated significantly with each of the three school climate factors. Students who experience more victimization also viewed their school as less

safe, less well-maintained and less supportive. This finding was consistent across genders. For Latino students, a correlation between victimization and perceptions of the school as unsafe was not present. As many school psychologists are aware, attention to these vulnerable students is crucial to enhance connectedness in this often disenfranchised group.

Given the consistent evidence of the importance of school support for all groups of students, school psychologists would benefit, first and foremost, from carefully assessing the unique needs of their particular student population. As this study suggests, the needs of students may differ and tailored, contextually specific approaches may best meet the needs of students. That said, a variety of avenues are available for schools to heighten students' feelings that their school is a caring and supportive place. For example, a buddy program may be implemented in which every entering 6th grade student is paired with a volunteer student from a more advanced grade. A school "Challenge Day" offers students a chance to break down stereotypes and increase personal connection through a series of trust building activities. Staff in-services may promote teacher understanding the importance of school climate to academic success.

Due to this study's reliance on self-report, spurious correlations and difficulties explicating causality exist. By virtue of the fact that they are succeeding in this particular school environment, high achieving students may perceive the school climate as more positive (Kasen, Johnson, & Cohen, 1990; Schmitt et al., 1999). While it may make intuitive sense that victimization leads to more negative perceptions of the school environment, it is also possible that a negative mindset makes young people more likely to be involved in negative altercations with others. Likewise, GPA may suffer due to victimization, or less academically successful students might make more likely targets for aggression.

There are several limitations to the current study, including its reliance on only one predictor of academic achievement, GPA. Future research would benefit from exploring other academic and behavioral indicators, particularly for Latino students. It may be that more significant effects were not found because salient outcome measures for this group were not used.

Examination of ethnic differences was further limited by the unequal sample sizes of the two ethnic groups, and by the method used to categorize students as Latino. Regarding the latter, future research would benefit from the exploration of additional cultural factors, such as acculturation.

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